

What Should Be by emmablownguns

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Summary:

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What Should Be

No one in Hawkins talked to Jonathan Byers, but everyone talked *about* him.

Nancy had grown up in a din of gossip, passed from her mother to her mother's friends at every PTA meeting and little league game they could muster. Karen Wheeler, in the spirit of stay at home moms everywhere, passed on gossip like her life depended on it, barely bothering to shoo away her children from eavesdropping. So, as a result, Nancy had been hearing about the Byers family long before their youngest became friends with Mike.

Besides, everyone knew what had happened to Jonathan Byers. It had become something of a spectacle to gawk at the only deaf kid in town.

From what Nancy was able to piece together through eavesdropping and process of elimination, Joyce Byers had gotten the german measles while pregnant, causing Jonathan Byers to be born deaf. There had only been a minor outbreak of it in Hawkins in the mid-60's, but it was enough for the virus to slip in.

After Jonathan was born and the news spread of what had happened to him, parents often used the Byers family as a cautionary tale -- the natural consequences for going without frequent checkups and shots.

Nancy remembered one afternoon spotting the Byers family across the field at a church banquet. She was in elementary school at the time, the same one as Jonathan, but he had special classes sequestered away from the rest of the students, so she rarely saw him. At recess, when the kids were forced to play together, none of the adults would be specific about *what* exactly Jonathan's problem was, only that the children were not to bother him. Schoolyard bullies found it simultaneously exhilarating and infuriating how he would not respond to their taunts, his face blinking back at them, unmoving and uncomprehending.

For a long time Nancy had just thought he had brain damage, but it was at this picnic that she realized that was not the case. The wind

was whipping napkins off of picnic tables, cotton dresses were rucked up and straw hats fell askew, and she noticed how surprisingly observant Jonathan was through all of this. His eyes darted from hat, to table, to birds flying overhead. This was not the lethargic gaze of someone with brain damage, Nancy reasoned. If anyone looked sluggish, it was his mother, whose nervous eyes had bags that showed the length of her long work days and the strain of raising a deaf child.

Nancy's father must've noticed them too, as he made a comment when they were in the car, long after the picnic tables were packed up and tupperware containers returned to their proper owners.

"I feel sorry for that Joyce Byers," He nearly muttered to himself, "That boy Jonathan must be a tough nut to crack."

"He's *deaf*, Ted." Nancy's mother said, her voice edging on irritation. It was the first time Nancy had heard that word before.

Despite the town's bizarre fascination with Jonathan's disability, the Byers family never moved from their place at the fringes of the community. They were always an afterthought, staying in the background of almost every conversation unless the subject turned to gossip. *Did you hear she's taking him for some tests in the city? Did you hear their father ran out on them?* Eventually, Nancy just started tuning it all out and focusing on herself, disgusted with the way her mother seemed to feed on the details of other people's lives.

Even when their brothers had become friends, Jonathan still kept his distance. He tended to stay in the car when he came to pick up his brother, honking the horn when he was out front. Nancy could only think of one time when he had come in, and that had been the subject of her mother's gossip circles in the weeks following.

Nancy had been in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Her mother ran to answer it, always jumping at the prospect of visitors. She heard her mother's voice raise before quickly quieting down, apparently realizing the futility of trying to shout through deafness. Nancy peeked through to the front hallway where Jonathan leaned awkwardly against the front door, pinned by the sheer force of hospitality emitting from Karen Wheeler. Mike and all his friends had

run whooshing past in a whirlwind, chattering on about monsters and wizards -- whatever they did down in the basement -- and Jonathan had looked at Nancy. They exchanged a kind of sheepish grin, almost as if to say, "can you believe these guys?" and then it was over, just as quickly as it had began.

It had been scary when Will Byers went missing, even when Steve had joked about Jonathan killing him, Nancy knew they were all shaken. Abductions and runaways didn't happen in their town, they just didn't. With their little brothers being friends, Nancy had kind of felt like she knew Jonathan in some distant way. They'd never spoken, but after Will has gone missing she'd desperately wanted to, as some sort of comfort, but Nancy didn't know how to bridge the gap between them. She saw him in the hallways, trying to project an aura of concern his way, and moving on silently.

When she'd found out that Jonathan been spying on them that night at Steve's, all Nancy could wonder was why them? Why *her*? She hadn't done anything to hurt him -- if that was even the motive for taking those pictures. Steve had been beyond pissed, but Nancy herself had been more confused than disturbed. She'd stood away from Steve and his friends, her eyebrows furrowed and gaze cast downward as they intimidated him.

Jonathan no doubt couldn't hear what they were saying, but she imagined the look on their faces was telling enough. Steve holding up the photos he'd taken, a vein in his throat popping out as he got angrier and angrier. His friends laughed and egged him on, delighting in his anger. Nancy's stomach lurched when, fueled by his fury, Steve dropped Jonathan's camera on the ground with a clatter. It reminded her of when they were kids, the way Jonathan looked back at them, silent and unblinking. Nancy felt a mixture of awe and guilt. On some level, she knew it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to pick on anyone, deaf or not, but on the other hand, Jonathan being deaf didn't excuse him from being a creep. He shouldn't have been out there, he shouldn't have taken those pictures, but that was all she was sure of.

Once the confrontation had more or less ended, Nancy had scrambled to pick up what remnants of the photos she could, not wanting the breeze to pick up and blow her picture all across campus. This time when they looked at each other his gaze could only be described as

gutted. He looked down at his camera remorsefully; Nancy caught a brief glimpse of it directed at her when he caught her looking. It was all she could do to shuffle away as quickly as possible.

Now, her hands shook as she pieced together his photographs, and she felt bile rise in her throat as her worst fears about Barb were confirmed. Nancy sat back on her bed, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. The contradictions in her head doubled as the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach multiplied by the minute. Nancy felt as though her entire worldview had been upended in just one afternoon. Who (or *what*) was that in the picture, lurking just on the edges of the trees? Had Jonathan seen them? Did he have more negatives that hadn't been developed? Thought just earlier that day she hadn't wanted to be anywhere near him, it was becoming more and more obvious that contacting Jonathan was the only way Nancy would be able to quiet the questions racing through her head. She was at a crossroads here, and she knew she had to talk to him about this, but the only question was: *how*?

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Joyce Byers had sounded exasperated on the phone, surprised to hear anyone was looking for her oldest son. She asked twice if Nancy was calling the right person, but she assured Joyce that she needed to "have a chat" with her son.

"Good luck with that," She laughed bitterly before sighing, "He's quite the conversationalist."

Nancy didn't know what to say to that, simply thanking her for her time and hanging up.

At the funeral home, the stuffy quiet atmosphere seemed oddly fitting considering who she was here to talk to today. All she'd thought to bring was a small legal pad and a pen, along with that picture of Barb. He doesn't have brain damage, she'd told herself, he has to be able to read, right? When she finally found Jonathan, looking at various caskets as the funeral director stood nervously at his side, she was surprised by how... Wrecked he looked. He was paler than usual, his hand shaking as he tousled his hair and looked between the two caskets in front of him. She raised her hand in a tentative wave and

coughed, getting the attention of the both of them.

“Can we help you?” The man asked, enlisting himself as Jonathan’s apparent translator. Jonathan was studying Nancy’s face, his gaze scrutinizing but otherwise unreadable.

“I’m actually here to talk to him,” She replied, nodding at Jonathan and stepping a few paces forward. “Jonathan?” Nancy knew he couldn’t hear her, but she hoped that the mouthing of his own name was at least a little familiar. She held out the pad of paper invitingly. Jonathan looked down at it, before looking back up at her. Nancy hoped he wouldn’t see her hand shaking. He glanced at the funeral director before nodding towards the door, walking past her and out into the hallway. She followed, and they both sat on one of the cushioned benches outside.

Nancy started with the most telling thing she could’ve brought, that picture. She pulled it out of her purse and handed it to Jonathan, carefully minding the taped together edges so as not to tear it apart any more. He visibly tensed when he saw it, furrowing his eyebrows together and swiping the pad of his thumb across a corner of the picture.

What is that in the corner?

Nancy scrawled it across the top of the legal pad, passing it to Jonathan and pointing at the right hand corner of the photo. Just barely obscured by the trees, something -- it didn’t even look human -- appeared to be lurking in the underbrush behind Steve’s house. Nancy didn’t know what it meant, but she knew that if anyone had answers, it would be the photographer himself. Jonathan looked down at everything Nancy had passed to him with a mixture of confusion and disdain, his eyes darted between the legal pad, the photograph, and the pen which Nancy was still holding out to him hopefully.

“Please,” she whispered pleadingly, the pen in her hand shaking as she tried to hand it to him, “Please?”

Something must’ve clicked, maybe it was the look on her face or the sheer desperation she was emitting, because Jonathan begrudgingly

took the pen. Nancy let out a big sigh of relief, running her hands through her hair and letting Jonathan take a closer look at the picture. He squinted, holding it closer to make out the shape at the edge of the photograph before penning a quick response and passing it back.

Trees?

Her heart sank at the short message, having come to what she felt was a dead end. Maybe it *was* just a tree, as if she hadn't considered that. Nancy bit her lip, thinking of another question. She quickly wrote it directly under Jonathan's response.

You know Barb's missing, right? Did you see anything that night?

Nancy passed it back, studying his face for any noticeable reaction and coming up empty. So far, "talking" to Jonathan hadn't been the revelation she'd hoped. He didn't even seem to *want* to communicate with her, which she supposed made sense seeing as he was *here* , picking out a casket for his brother's funeral. A wave of remorse flooded over Nancy as she realized what he must be going through, and she wondered why she'd even bothered him with this. Eventually, he finished writing, lightly poking her with a corner of the pad of paper.

I didn't see anything... I can't make out what's in the picture, but I know how we can get a better look?

His handwriting was tentative and loopy, Nancy was concerned by how sloppy his lines were, but the words gave her a renewed sense of purpose. They continued in this way for quite awhile, passing each other the pen and paper, filling up pages with Nancy's studious penmanship theorizing on Barb's disappearance and Jonathan's sloppy handwriting explaining how they'd enlarge the photo in the lab at Hawkins High to get a better look. Though it had taken some grunt work on her end, Jonathan was going to help her figure this out. She glanced at the clock, realizing all at once how late it had gotten. Nancy quickly penned her phone number on the corner of the paper, tearing it off and handing it to Jonathan. He took it, then looked back up at her doubtfully. She didn't know why he'd given her that look until he tapped the side of his head -- his *ears* -- and

shrugged. Realization quickly dawned on Nancy, and she covered her face with her hands. She looked back up when she heard a quiet chuckle, only to see Jonathan grinning wryly.

“Sorry,” Nancy shrugged, tousling her hair nervously. Jonathan shrugged back before motioning for the pad of paper. She obliged, handing it to him bashfully.

Is this the first time you've talked to a deaf person?

She read it before looking back up at him and nodding.

After that, they quickly scribbled back and forth their plans to meet in the photo lab of Hawkins High to get a closer look at this photo. *And don't telling anyone we're doing this*, Jonathan had written, *Mr.Peterson doesn't like me to use the lab for “personal photos.”* He'd punctuated the sentence with a small doodle of a smiley face, uncharacteristically expressive, knowing him. After they'd said their goodbyes and agreed on meeting times, they parted ways. Jonathan slunk back into the parlor of the funeral home and Nancy quickly walked outside, releasing a big breath of air once she was free of that place.

That night, she wanted to tell someone about what she'd done, maybe revel in the accomplishment or speculate on what kind of guy Jonathan Byers was. Nancy rolled over in bed, reaching for the phone on her bed side table before pausing. Who could she call? Steve was out of the question, and Carol couldn't be trusted to keep *anything* a secret. She realized the only person she really wanted to talk to was Barb, but Nancy wasn't sure if she'd ever get to do that again. The realization sank into the pit of her stomach, settling there like an anchor, but in a way Nancy also felt strangely determined. She would find Barb. She *would*. Jonathan would help her, and if that proved pointless she'd take off on foot.

Nancy settled down in bed, a strange peace settling over her. She fell asleep slowly, marveling at how, in all the years she'd known him, Nancy had finally managed to bridge the communication barrier between her and Jonathan.

In a way, she'd already won.

Author's Note:

i dont know if im going to write any more of this, i might if people like it. but i have to think. this was just based off an idea i had.